DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 177 802 EC 121 237

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TITLE Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Handicapped Personnel Training Project.
PUB DATE Jul 78
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Central Regional Meeting of the Division of Personnel Preparation, Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, U.S. Office of Education (Washington, DC, July, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Early Childhood Education; Educational Needs; *Handicapped Children; Interdisciplinary Approach; Models; Needs Assessment; *Performance Based Teacher Education; Personnel Needs; *Special Degree Programs; Special Education Teachers; Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS *Western Illinois University Project WIU

ABSTRACT

The report describes the Western Illinois University 0-6 Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Handicapped Personnel Training Project (WIU 0-6 Project)--a model project designed to demonstrate innovative methods to fill personnel needs for early childhood handicapped programs. The project is a 2 semester program to train professional educators in the competencies that will enable them to work with handicapped children from birth to 6 years of age in a variety of service delivery settings, and employs faculty from five academic fields important to the education of young handicapped children: special education, elementary education, home economics, physical education, and psychology. Three issues are addressed by the program: state personnel needs, teacher preparation needs, and handicapped children's needs. Participation based, the program provides the opportunity for the immediate testing and validation of theoretical constructs. Preliminary data indicate that the described model is providing project graduates the necessary skills to be effective teachers of young handicapped children. (DLS)

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Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Handicapped Personnel Training Project

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A paper presented at the
Central Regional Meeting of the Division of Personnel Preparation
Bureau of Education for the Handicapped
U.S. Office of Education

Washington, D.C.
July 1978

EC121237

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INTERDISCIPLINARY EARLY CHILDHOOD HANDICAPPED PERSONNEL TRAINING PROJECT

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Basic to the service and treatment for handicapped children is the tenet that early identification and intervention can minimize the long term effect the handicapping condition will have on the child. Recognition of this tenet emphasizes the importance of the availability of personnel trained to work with young handicapped children. There is presently a critical shortage of early childhood handicapped personnel and early childhood handicapped training programs. The Western Illinois University 0-6 Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Handicapped Personnel Training Project (WIU 0-6 Project) is a model project designed to demonstrate innovative methods to fill personnel needs for early childhood handicapped programs.

Project Description

Overview

The WIU 0-6 Project is a two semester, participation-based program designed to train professional educators in the competencies that will enable them to work with handicapped children from birth to six years of age in a variety of service delivery settings. The project is interdisciplinary with faculty from five academic departments, (special education, elementary education, home economics, physical education and psychology), representing four of the colleges at Western Illinois University.

The project is a fifth-year program consisting of two major components. Depending upon their major area of emphasis, students may be either seeking preschool handicapped ceritification or specific skills for working with the young handicapped child not leading to certification.

Using a comprehensive set of competencies, project completion results in Illinois Type 10 certification (special education) or Type 2 certification (early childhood) for students in those fields. Students in support areas (physical education, speech pathology, home economics, psychology) also acquire competencies for specialized positions in the early childhood handicapped field.

The W.U 0-6 Project addresses itself to three vital issues: state personnel needs, teacher preparation needs, and ultimately, handicapped children's needs. Focusing on the young handicapped provides personnel who can develop programming for infants, toddlers, and the 3-5 year old range, depending on the age emphasis in the employing school district.

Interdisciplinary

The project's interdisciplinary focus represents a cross section of important professional areas which add breadth and dimension to the development of personnel training. It is recognized that professionals in fields other than special education and early childhood education have expertise regarding the problems of the young handicapped and that many are actively involved with these problems as they relate to their specific professional role.

Faculty from five departments share instructional responsibility and make substantial area specific content contributions. The division of labor can be summarized as follows: Special Education - characteristics of the young handicapped child, methods and materials for early childhood handicapped, psychoeducational diagnosis and evaluation, and behavior management; Elementary Education - early childhood philosophy, curriculum, organization, administration, programs, and development; Home Economics - child development, family relations, and nutrition; Physical Education - motor development, adaptive physical activities, movement training, and kinesiology; Psychology - child development, measurement and evaluation, child anomalies, and childhood psychopathologies.

The functions of the Project faculty include development instructional strategies designed so that the students can gain the appropriate competencies. The Project faculty team is also responsible for supervising students in practicum sites, working cooperatively with the staff in those sites and providing in-service training where needed. The Project faculty is involved in team teaching, cooperative planning, evaluation, development of new materials, and recruiting students into the program.

Often within the university structure, professionals with overlapping or complementary expertise work independently of one another because of programmatic design. Not only is this true of fields like special education, elementary education and physical education (though

all three are teacher training programs) but it is particularly the case with fields not directly involved in teacher education such as home economics and psychology. The WIU 0-6 Project provides not only a forum for the exchange of ideas and techniques relating to the young handicapped child but also an opportunity for students training in the project to have the benefit of a broad range of interests, orientations, and knowledge bases.

Participation-based

The project is practically based on progressively increased participation in various practicum sites. Practicum sites include: preschool handicapped classrooms in the counties surrounding Western Illinois University; a regional, federally funded, home-based, 0-3 training program for the infant handicapped and their parents; a center-based program for persons from zero to adulthood (including approximately 150 preschool children) who are developmentally disabled; area day care centers for normally developing children; a University classroom for three to five years olds and a University child development nursery school. All students participate in the two University facilities as well as the area day care centers to gain experience with children whose development is relatively typical. The project insures careful placement of students in practicum sites in relationship to their previous experiences, their major area, and their specific needs.

Two semesters combine coursework and practical work with children at the practicum sites, an optional semester is an internship frequently spent on-site in the same cooperating agencies or programs that served as practicum sites. The project emphasizes that professionals in a variety of settings are involved in the necessary intervention for young handicapped children. Graduates of the project can function in the following areas: community mental health agencies, nursery schools, day care centers, recreation programs, physical education, special education classrooms, community agencies offering specialized programs, and institutional care facilities.

The project philosophy is one that calls for extensive practical experience with young children, both handicapped and those that are developing normally. Rather than concentrating coursework at the beginning of the project and practical experience at the end, as is the case with many typical training programs, practical experience with children is an integral part of all phases of the WIU 0-6 Project. Such a program design provides the following opportunities: 1) Faculty can conduct ongoing evaluation of course offerings and content and practical experiences to match student demonstrated competencies; 2) the simultaneous involvement in coursework and fieldwork can provide a practical framework in which to test and validate theoretical constructs; 3) extensive pre-service experience that has been tailored to fit individual needs should result in professional skills more extensive than generally anticipated for entry level; and 4) students

experiencing difficulty in the field placements can be counseled early to re-assess career aspirations and expectations.

Competency-based

The project operates on the assumption that the unique preparation of each student can be determined and analyzed, and that individual students will enter the project with different experiences and will possess different sets of competencies. These competencies will be allowed for when the student's program is developed. Decision-making regarding the development of a student's program include the student, the project faculty, observers of the student's work with children and parents, and practicum site personnel. Course content and competencies have been planned to meet the needs of certification, as well as the practical needs of programs for handicapped young children.

A primary goal of the project was the development of a comprehensive set of competencies for training personnel to deal with the very young child. All students contract for and attain competencies to work with the young child in an effective manner. These competencies are acquired from experience with handicapped and normal children as well as from a thorough knowledge base of developmental concepts and principles.

The competency-based activities designed for the project necessarily assume that although students are enrolled in regular university courses, the nature of their coursework is different from the customarily expected daily lectures. A comprehensive set of

competencies necessary to the effective planning and managing of educational environments for young handicapped children have been developed for each project area represented by the five academic disciplines; special education, elementary education, home economics, physical education, and psychology. Four elements are necessary in order to evaluate the student's progress and simultaneously evaluate the judged effectiveness of each project component. The procedures for accomplishing this evaluation are as follows: 1) the obtaining of knowledge and skill indices regarding class activity within the context of various types of instructional components; 2) the assurance that each student and his or her respective faculty members and site supervisor know what knowledge or performance competency is expected; 3) the evaluation of each student continuously as he or she progresses through his or her pre-planned program; 4) and the evaluation of the effectiveness of the competency-based program, with simultaneous judgements by the student, the faculty member, and the site supervisor.

Meeting the individual training needs of pre-service personnel and the high skill level attainment this facilitates is reasonable assurance that the necessary professional competence to provide for the individual needs of young handicapped children will be reached. Project activities are also an effective delivery system to provide additional skills in early childhood handicapped education to practicing teachers and graduate students.

Summary

The WIU 0-6 Project is a teacher education program with the principle objective of designing and implementing a training model for personnel to work with multi-categorical handicapped children from birth to six years of age. The project is unique in a number of different ways. First, it is interdisciplinary and represents a cross section of professional fields important to the education of young handicapped children. Second, the project is progressively participation-based and provides the opportunity for the immediate testing and validation of theoretical constructs. Finally, the project is competency-based. Course content and methodology are developed into precise competencies that allow each student to determine his or her strengths and weaknesses and develop the appropriate training program.

Preliminary data indicates that the described model is providing project graduates the necessary skills to be effective teachers of young handicapped children. It is anticipated that such success will encourage the use of the Western Illinois University 0-6 Interdisciplinary Early Childhood/Handicapped Personnel Training Project as a model for the development of other teacher training programs for young handicapped children.